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PERSONNEL FOR COLLEGE COMPOSITION

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However unpalatable the fact may be, it is nevertheless true that for years the college course in required composition has been the salvage dump for young doctors of philosophy, and especially for men and women of uncertain or negative qualifications, for whom on various grounds a post had to be discovered or devised. The fault can scarcely be said to lie at the door of the "administrator who cannot administer," whose vision is clouded by lack of judgment, or whose hands are bound by precedent or inertia. Indeed, it may be doubted if he really exists outside the imaginations of his victims. Every administrator of a required course or of a department of English has felt the defects of his work; usually he would be the last to think that it could not be improved. When he assigned that young doctor to the section of required composition, he was probably following a well-established precedent; or he may have been moved principally by his duty to fit, by compromise and necessitous sacrifice, his men to jobs; or he may previously have found a position which he thought suited to this particular teacher, but which the younger man had good grounds for refusing; or he perhaps could discover no reason sufficiently cogent to prevent the young man's being given the task of teaching Freshmen to write.

From any point of view, the problem is not single. Rather it is complicated by every circumstance of character and environment which enters into it. Other subjects impose more or less definite requirements and equipment upon instructors. The teacher of Anglo-Saxon must know Anglo-Saxon; the instructor in the general survey of English literature must have a bowing acquaintance with a fairly well-defined body of writers; but for the teacher of composition what qualities can be regarded as of sufficient importance to outweigh seeming necessities? Perhaps in the

fact that almost no one has ever embarked upon a course of graduate study with the ultimate aim of teaching Freshmen to write may be found the real crux of the administrator's problem.

Everyone knows that the qualifications of the new doctor of philosophy, often attained after a hard fight, not only to study, but also to live, seldom prove immediately marketable. He must wait until an opening occurs. Meanwhile he, often his wife, and not infrequently his children, must be fed, clothed, and housed. He had fitted himself for a profession in which he hoped to win recognition, even distinction, but when he showed himself to its priests, they would have none of him. Thus he discovered himself face to face with an elementary problem of life, one of the eternal compromises which his three or more years of advanced instruction and research had scarcely fitted him to solve: Should he leave the calling for which, hopefully and thoroughly, he had equipped himself—college or university teaching—and try to earn a living in business; or should he yield to inclinations toward scholarship and to vaguely conditioned promises, and undertake work in composition until he might enter into his heritage of "productive scholarship"? Usually he chose to wander for his allotted term in "Freshman English."

This work he entered upon as a dreary waste, of the theme, themey; of hurried and unwilling communion with textbooks filled with matter, alas, too true; of wrestling with unity, coherence, and mass under various guises; refreshed occasionally by research in "his field," which seemed only a mirage. There passed one, two, or three years of small pay, smaller encouragement, and opportunities for adding to the sum of human knowledge smaller still. He became at home in the college or university, while his superiors discussed him as a compromise. Offers from smaller colleges, set forth in glowing colors, reached him, but for various reasons he passed them by. To his superiors he became an unwelcome fixture, a problem. At last either they decided that "for his own good" he must be placed elsewhere, or there came an offer of apparently sufficient dignity, power, and pay, and he accepted.

In his new position things were hardly so rosy as they had been painted. His new chief found him a willing and handy man, already

experienced of composition; and, without more than passing thought, condemned him again to the treadmill of "Freshman English." True, he might have a course, more or less, in his subject, but the drudgery was the more bitter because it took time from what he considered his life-work. At last came the release. Through promotion or change of institution he was enabled to leave forever the grind of the required course in composition and enter into his Promised Land.

Though in more recent years this hypothetical case has been varied by the study in graduate schools of courses in the materials and methods of teaching composition, such courses have been regarded mainly as stop-gaps, to be taken in prudential preparation for evils to come. Nor can instruction in pedagogy be said to have counteracted the defects of the compromise that has been allowed to develop into a system. The situation remains, and will remain until it is overturned root and branch.

The head of a department, hampered often by internal conditions of personalities and externally by the amount of money available, has been forced by pride and severely practical considerations to make his teachers go as far as he could. Too frequently he has not differentiated between promise as a scholar and promise as a teacher. One who would teach composition successfully needs a grain of executive ability. Nor have departments of English, devoted largely to the production of scholars or critics, done their whole and kindlier duty in discouraging from entering the teaching of English those men and women who are foredoomed to fail, on one ground or another, as teachers of youth. Passable though some of them may become as instructors in literature, they lack the most elementary qualifications of teachers of writing. In some measure these difficulties might have been obviated if instructors responsible for the conduct of large courses in composition had been given the right of nominating their own assistants, instead of finding that their courses had become dumping-grounds for worthy aspirants to scholarships, who had gathered overmuch rust while laying in their store of learning. Yet in the idea, erroneous and mischievous as it has proved to be, that "Freshman English" provided a convenient catch-all for the products of

graduate schools who could not be immediately placed elsewhere, there is recognizable a hazy tribute to the energizing power of teaching composition to young men and women, whose very youth is a challenge.

The type of man or woman who should be chosen and encouraged to become a teacher of English composition is not open to definition merely because no one type of individual can ever be entirely adequate for the diversity of the work. Indeed, the wise director of a course in general composition, left to his own devices and unhampered by lack of funds or the necessities of providing a haven for scholastic derelicts, would avoid selecting any single type. In any case he may be certain at the outset that scholarship, ripe or immature, is not a *sine qua non* for an instructor in composition, any more than it should be considered *per se* a bar to success. The scholar and the teacher of composition must possess not a few traits in common: patience; minds trained to clear and accurate thinking; devotion to duty; ability to keep heads above the flood of detail which, differing for each, too often engulfs both. The plain truth is that training for the doctoral examination is no guaranty of success in teaching any subject, and especially it does not inculcate habits of thought which, alone, can make a boy want to learn to write. Occasionally, it is true, three years of seminaries, investigation of minute critical and textual matters, the preparation of a dissertation, and the grill of the examination, serve only to stimulate the desire for contact with the unfolding mind. In most cases the study of pedagogy will furnish no more than a veneer of teaching ability, if the more solid substance be lacking. And yet scholarship and the ability to teach are upon no grounds mutually exclusive; they are complementary. There will continue to exist one-sided teachers and one-sided scholars; in fact, most of the prejudice which, old-fashioned though it is, still holds against the young doctor of philosophy, had its roots in the failure of the youthful Ph.D. who had been assigned against his will to teach subjects and students in which he could conjure up only the remotest interest. Consider his preparation, and wonder, not why he was unsuccessful, but why there was occasionally vouchsafed to him a grain of success!

Nor is an interest in things literary a sure qualification for the teacher of composition; no, nor the desire to write for publication, nor facility in verse, nor the ability to turn out romances or essays or plays. Weighty though the creative faculty may be in establishing authority and in leading the student to say inwardly, "He knows what he is talking about, because he writes himself," it is not the key to the problem. Like scholarship, the ability to write a salable manuscript neither makes nor breaks a teacher of composition. There is no reason why a scholar should not teach Freshmen to write in the morning, occupy himself during the afternoon with a new phase of the relations between Chaucer and Gower, and devote the evening to dashing off a detective story, except that he does not. The qualities are not mutually exclusive by any test; as regards the teaching of composition, they are merely not final.

On the other hand, there may be enumerated five positive qualifications for the good teacher of composition. They are not often found in force in the same individual, but traces of all may be discovered in the man or woman who has taught writing successfully. It is impossible to believe that the scholar or the man of letters is necessarily excluded from the possession and enjoyment of any or all of them. In how far these qualifications may be common to demands upon the whole teaching profession, it is impossible here to discuss.

Of the characteristics, the first is interest in teaching, in the development and growth of the young mind, but especially in teaching composition. At present such is the status and repute of the task of instruction in writing that no man or woman should be offered it as an only alternative to leaving the profession. Conversely, such an interest can scarcely be alien to any instructor who has elected to follow the profession. It must strike deeper than the surface of the teacher's life, yet not so deep as to sully the pool with the mud of pedantry. The teaching of English composition is but an attempt to anticipate time. The habit of orderly thought, the saving grace of the good sentence, the vision of a beginning and a middle and an end, may be acquired from other sources, experiences, and training; the province of the course in composition is to furnish a short cut toward these achievements and to endow

the learner with a maturity usually beyond his years and natural attainment. For this reason, of the teacher of composition are demanded the more patience, tolerance, sympathy, and enthusiasm.

Secondly, the teacher of composition must have receptivity toward new ideas, an aptitude for developing from the merest hint a method or a means of approach which shall give new life to old principles and lead students to apply them eagerly to old problems newly met. In no kind of teaching is this quality so needed as in composition. Not only does it imply a willingness, an eagerness to seize the ideas of others, to analyze them, and, rejecting the inapplicable, to make use of those which fit current situations, but it implies also, and perhaps especially, a fertility in inventing fresh expedients and devices on the part of the teacher himself. Most important of all, it implies initiative.

Similarly, the third qualification is to some extent a possession of all successful teachers. Broader than either of the first two, it covers a divergent field ranging between the ability to project one's self into the situation of the student, to "put yourself in his place," and the power to hold a class. It is certainly akin to the power of the actor, if not identical with it, because upon it rests the success of the teacher of composition in classroom and especially in conference. Possibly it is related to what once was known as knowledge of human nature, plain, common, horse sense. Yet it is a little more than this, for it contains an active element, which combines with interest and forms one of the most valuable traits in the good teacher of composition, the ability to adapt one's self to a situation. In his section difficulties of discipline are unknown. Such an absence of friction is due to amiableness, and a geniality which is never cheap or undignified, but more especially to an attitude of fairness toward his students, a willingness to give as well as take and to go more than halfway in the "joint search after truth" which in skilful hands the present-day college course in English composition, elementary or advanced, must inevitably become. He can hold his class, and, in a manner of speaking, he can act as well for an audience of one as of thirty. Indeed, his profession has more kinship with the actor's than might at first appear. Often a good actor will make a good teacher, for his

training upon the stage will lead him to "feel" his class, to sense the first signs of boredom and flagging attention, and to strive to hold their interest at almost any cost. The joining thus of actor and teacher is not a disparagement to either profession; as for the teacher, if he were paid directly by his class, and if they persistently went to sleep in dull lectures and hissed him when he bored them—exercising, in fact, the inalienable rights of the audience at a play—it is probable that the standard of teaching in these United States would gain in interest.

The fourth quality of the successful teacher of composition is physical strength. The profession can probably show a higher percentage of round shoulders, curved spines, and contracted chests than any other walk in life. The reason is to be found not in the fact that the weaker men and women select teaching as a life-work, but that, once having entered upon it, they neglect their physical well-being and make themselves the slaves of their positions. Now, at certain times the teacher of writing has need of all the freshness and vigor of mind that outdoor exercise can give. The long hours of conference, the piles of manuscript, the want of variety in its larger aspects make a demand upon his nervous and physical strength greater, even at the least, than that laid upon the teacher of any other subject. The teacher of chemistry or physics conducts his laboratory period perhaps five times a week, but he is free to move about his laboratory, and the mere physical exertion permits him to strike, as it were, a balance between physical and mental fatigue. The teacher of history or economics rarely concerns himself with the form of the manuscript which he reads. The teacher of composition, on the other hand, must deal with both form and content; he must exercise for long hours at a stretch a constant vigilance against errors of detail, even the most minute, and at the same time "hold his standard," take an occasional glance at those eternal values which he must apply and correlate to the case of his individual student. For such constant application he must have a strong body, which from time to time he must refresh by exercise and physical relaxation.

Finally, he must have catholicity of taste. One of the most undesirable and yet most frequent results of a course in writing is

facility in turning out one kind of composition only. For the teacher the temptation is great to lead his students into the writing of facetious nothings "after the manner of" a long line of more or less easily imitable masters from Leigh Hunt to Stevenson and O. Henry. That imitation has its place in the teaching of composition may be admitted freely and, indeed, gratefully; it was well established when Erasmus, breaking with the Ciceronians, wrote his textbook for the boys of Colet's school. His followers and successors, conscious or unconscious, even the unacademic Fulwood and the meticulous Hoole, never seriously or effectually disputed its value. Erasmus points to variety in models, and this was one of the reasons why in his *Copia* he broke with the Ciceronians, who clung to the hard-and-fast traditions of the single model. Much study of one writer and the attempt to imitate him will give to even the most backward student what is too often taken superficially for a style, but it places upon him a yoke of servitude which can only retard his progress. Interest is relative. The man or woman who cannot discover a spark of interest in any subject in which a learner may be interested should cease trying to teach anyone to write.

Yet the skilful instructor will avoid posing as an authority. He will demand plan and structure, and he will know well enough for practical purposes whether a subject is treated well or ill. Occasionally he will put himself in the position of a learner whom his pupil will try to instruct. Especially, he will avoid antagonizing quibbles over unimportant details of fact. After all, the successful teacher of composition leads, never drives.

Tales there are of gala days at state universities, when teachers and students entertain members of the legislature in the endeavor to secure appropriations and increases. The university, one is told, suspends academic work to indulge in a glorious tag day, to secure for the coming two years money sufficient to carry on its work. Professors of industrial arts vie with teachers of the humanities in exhibiting their wares; chemists and Latinists, physicists and linguists, engage in a wholesale campaign to "sell" the university. At first the eastern teacher stands aghast at this commercialization of learning and education, but on calmer reflection

he cannot but see some advantage in the breaking down of academic isolation which attends the legislative invasion. Indeed, any event, however unimportant—and one can scarcely call the biennial visit of state senators and representatives unimportant—which serves to force the teacher into contact with a larger public, contains an element of good. Of all the academic group, the social scientist stands nearest to life as it is lived beyond the college walls. The chemist has opportunities for contact with industry. The instructor in English is usually among the furthest removed from things and people extra-academic. Yet this contact is precisely what is needed for the full development of a teacher of composition. Most of them suffer from isolation in degrees which vary from social diffidence to business credulity; scarcely any are free from it. For the representation on the stage of the pedant, which after all coincides in the majority of lay minds with the conception of the college or university professor, no one is so much responsible as the professor himself. It is true that teaching composition is no more “narrowing” than teaching literature or language or science, or manufacturing pig iron or operating railroads or coal mines or engaging in any kind of business, but between the extremes of commercial and academic isolation lies a mean which will lend itself less readily to ridicule, and which will divest the annual appearance of the professor at the alumni dinner of its present circus-like qualities. To attain this mean is not easy, but for the sake of the profession every young teacher of composition should be encouraged to attempt it. He needs sacrifice no standard, social or intellectual, none of his self-respect, nothing, perhaps, except a little time—which, to be sure, is often the most valuable thing he can call his own—and he will return to his work with freshened mind.

So much for the qualities of character which the good teacher of composition should possess. Of the actual knowledge and training requisite to his duties, little has been said; not because that technical equipment is unimportant, but because it is secondary, and, given the receptive young man or woman, it is more easily imparted than any of these five qualities. It is the director of the large elementary course upon whom this task must lie.

The teacher responsible for the conduct of a general course in English composition must have a voice in the selection of his staff. Today the instances in which he has gained that right are relatively rare. His instructors or assistants are doled out to him and he makes the most of what he can get. Though his approval is usually sought before an appointment is made, yet generally he knows this to be solely a matter of departmental courtesy, in which his protests against unwelcome or what he considers unpromising material will be largely unavailing. With tact and foresight he will occasionally find it possible to exercise choice in some proportion of his assistants, and by making this selection, he can secure a nucleus of men or of women endowed with qualities which he can develop. If he believes his general course to be the most important course in college—and without this conviction he should never undertake to direct such a course—he will be willing to teach his teachers, to provide them with references and technical information which will enable them to fall into line with the work and standards of the course. The means by which he will accomplish this he must devise and adapt for himself. Thus, other things being equal, the selection of his staff is his most important duty, because upon that the success of his course directly depends.

In such a selection he will rigidly avoid, as far as he can, any one type of teacher. He may draw his assistants from holders of the doctorate, from young graduates who have as yet done no advanced study, and from teachers who have already had some experience in secondary schools. The third source is generally neglected. For all our furor to bridge the gap between the preparatory school and the college, we have neglected too much this most obvious aid. Not all teachers in preparatory schools are fitted by training, youth, and temperament to undertake college or university instruction, but there exists a considerable body of men and women who are ready and able to make the change. The director will find one serious obstacle in the small salaries which he can offer to his candidates for college appointments, but this is no new evil in the situation and usually it lies outside his individual power to correct, except for persistent requests for increases. At

present the young man or young woman who desires to teach English in a college is called upon to pay for the privilege rather more heavily than he at the outset anticipates. Salaries are not large and living accommodations are dear and often uncongenial. Whether really adequate remedies for these conditions can be secured is mainly a question of locality and the individual institution. At any rate, the problem exists at so many colleges that it becomes practically a common factor. From young men or young women who desire more to teach than to do anything else in the world, a perspicacious director may in time build up a staff which, in contrast with so many groups of teachers of composition at work today, will be not merely adequate but superlative.